



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### New Evidence

**Citation for published version:**

Carpenter, S 2009, 'New Evidence: Vives and Audience-Response to Biblical Drama', *Medieval English Theatre*, vol. 31, pp. 3-12. <<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/meth/vol31.html#Carpenter>>

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Medieval English Theatre

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Carpenter, S. (2009). New Evidence: Vives and Audience-Response to Biblical Drama. Medieval English Theatre, 31, 3-12

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Carpenter, S 2009, 'New Evidence: Vives and Audience-Response to Biblical Drama' *Medieval English Theatre*, vol 31, pp. 3-12.

### **New evidence: Vives and audience-response to biblical drama**

Across many media of performance, audiences and spectators are increasingly a focus of study. Understanding spectatorship, and what it contributes to the meaning of any performance, is now an important topic in film and television studies, and emerging as a focus also for live performance events.<sup>1</sup> In early drama, too, interest is growing in the importance of audiences – what John McGavin calls ‘value-laden witnessing’ – for our understanding of plays, ceremonies, games and shows.<sup>2</sup> But for the field of audience study there is a particular difficulty with any non-contemporary performance, which is especially acute in the case of medieval theatre. At this distance in time, the reactions of audiences seem inaccessible. We have scripts, records of material evidence, regulations, scenarios and reports, but very rarely any evidence of how spectators responded to what they saw.

Of course there are various other paths to deducing or hypothesising audience response. Studies of the local context of any particular event may give us clues, as for example with the political circumstances which illuminate Heywood’s *Play of the Weather*.<sup>3</sup> Analogous interpretative material may throw light on theatrical effect, such as the vernacular meditations on the life of Christ which illuminate the affective responses invited by the passion plays.<sup>4</sup> The detailed study of scripts and staging frequently reveals how audiences were encouraged and invited to react. But direct evidence of audience and spectator response is sparse. In this rather barren field, the purpose of this paper is to re-introduce to the study of medieval theatre one valuable but largely forgotten piece of such evidence: an eye-witness report of an audience’s response to Passion plays, dating from the early years of the sixteenth century. I will not attempt to develop a fully researched analysis of the plays in question or the particular context of performance. Rather, the aim here is simply to re-publish the

---

<sup>1</sup> For recent overviews see Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn, *The Audience Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), Michele Aaron, *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On* (London: Wallflower, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> John J. McGavin, *Theatricality and Narrative in Medieval and Early Modern Scotland* (Aldershot ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 76-116.

<sup>4</sup> Meg Twycross, ‘Books for the Unlearned’ in *Drama and Religion*, edited by James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

evidence and point to some of its general implications for the study of early theatre through its audiences.<sup>5</sup>

This evidence is especially intriguing precisely because it deals primarily not with the organisation, the texts, or production of medieval drama, but with its contemporary reception. Although we have so little evidence for how audiences received and understood plays, we are beginning to recognise how audience response may confirm, complicate or alter the meanings of performance events. The effect on the audience is, of course, the end purpose of all drama; but it is also a key to understanding those elements of meaning that are only created in the act of performance itself, and which are often incalculable from the records of how plays were written or staged. The rare responses that are recorded from or about spectators of early plays and performances can throw sometimes quite unexpected light on what they meant in their own time. It was the discovery of an eyewitness report of *Gorboduc*, for instance, that revealed the political meaning of the dumbshows taken by original spectators, which is not available from the surviving text.<sup>6</sup> It is the chroniclers' accounts of the royal entry of Anne Boleyn that reveal the onlookers' ribald interpretation of the formally decorative wreathed monograms of Henry and his new bride.<sup>7</sup>

The evidence discussed here has something of the same capacity to reveal unexpected responses that may alter our view of the plays in question. It comes from a wholly non-dramatic source, which is presumably why it has found its way into few modern studies of late medieval drama: the commentary by Vives on Augustine's *City of God*, first published in 1522. In Book 8, Ch 27 Augustine distinguishes the Christian practice of honouring martyrs, from pagan customs of worshipping gods or the dead which involve ceremonial and shows. Vives comments on this passage by criticising the performance of contemporary Passion plays which are, he claims, little different

---

<sup>5</sup> The evidence discussed here seems to have dropped out of sight of current scholars of medieval theatre. It is cited and discussed in Joseph E Gillet, 'The German Dramatist of the Sixteenth Century and His Bible' *PMLA* 34, no. 3 (1919) 465-93, and in fact (as so much else) quoted in EK Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* Vol 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923) 185-6.

<sup>6</sup> Henry James and Greg Walker, 'The Politics of Gorboduc', *The English Historical Review* 110, no. 435 (1995) 109-121.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon Kipling, "'He That Saw It Would Not Believe It": Anne Boleyn's Royal Entry into London' in *Civic Ritual and Drama* edited by Alexandra F Johnston and Wim Hüsken (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997) 39-80.

from the ancient pagan practices. He describes the apparently vocal and volatile responses of the popular audience in vivid, though negative terms. The full passage in its original Latin is quoted here, followed by the earliest English translation of the work, published in 1610:

At qui mos nunc est, quo tempore sacrum celebrant Christi morte sua genus humanum liberantis, ludos nihil prope a scenicis illis ueteribus differentes populo exhibere. etiam si aliud non dixero satis turpe existimabit quisquis audiet, ludos fieri in re maxime seria. Ibi ridetur Iudas quam potest ineptissima iactans, dum Christum prodit. ibi discipuli fugiunt militibus persequentibus, nec sine cachinnis & actorum & spectatorum: ibi Petrus auriculam rescindit Malcho, applaudente pullata turba, ceu ita uindicetur Christi captiuitas. Et post paulum, qui tam strenue modo dimicarat, rogationibus unius ancillulae territus abnegat magistrum, ridente multitudine ancillam interrogantem, et exhibente Petrum negantem. Inter tot ludentes, inter tot cachinnos & ineptias solus Christus est serius, & seuerus. quumque affectus conatur moestos elicere, nescio quo pacto non ibi tantum, sed etiam ad sacra frigefacit, magno scelere atque impietate non tam eorum qui uel spectant, uel agunt, quam sacerdotum, qui eiusmodi fieri curant. Sed hisce de rebus loquemur forsan commodiore loco.<sup>8</sup>

But now, euen at the celebration of Christs passion and our redemption, it is a custome to present plaies almost as vile as the old stage-games: should I be silent, the very absurdity of such shewes in so reuerend a matter, would condemne it sufficiently. There *Iudas* plaieth the most ridiculous *Mimike*, euen then when he betraies Christ. There the *Apostles* run away, and the soldiors follow, and all resounds with laughter. Then comes *Peter*,<sup>9</sup> and cuttes off *Malchus* eare, and then all rings with applause, as if *Christs* betraying were now reuenged. And by and by this great fighter comes and for feare of a girle, denies his Maister, all the people laughing at her question, and hissing at his deniall: and in all these reuells and ridiculous stirres Christ onely is serious and seuer: but seeking to mooue passion and sorrow in the audience, hee is so farre from that, that hee is cold euen

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* comm. JL Vives (Basle: Frobenius, 1522) Bk 8 Ch 27, 266-7.

<sup>9</sup> Marginal note: 'Plaies of the passion of Iesus Christ, vnlawfull'.

in the diuineſt matters: to the great guilt,<sup>10</sup> ſhame, and ſinne both of the prieſts that preſent this, and the people that behold it. But wee may perhaps finde a fitter place for this thaeme.<sup>11</sup>

Vives' description is clearly biased and unsympathetic, but it seems a wonderfully vivid and immediate account of the way in which audiences responded to the Passion drama he has in mind. It gives us a glimpse of plays in performance, and suggests a tone, mood and experience of spectatorship that we would be unlikely to have realised from either the playtext or dramatic records, had they survived.

The context for this surprisingly placed account is not easy to pin down, though it will of course have a bearing on its implications. It is not immediately clear what kind of drama Vives is describing, or even from what country or area. He himself had an interestingly mixed background, and by 1522 would have encountered theatrical practice in several different countries. He was born into a converted Jewish family in Spain around 1492, and grew up in Valencia. Possibly to escape the Inquisition, he moved as a scholar to Paris where he lived from around 1509 until 1514. After this, he spent most of his life in the Low Countries, particularly in Bruges where he married, and in Louvain, where he was an active member of the intellectual elite.<sup>12</sup> He was close friends with Erasmus who promoted him and his work, especially this edition and commentary on the *City of God*. It was apparently at Erasmus' suggestion that Vives dedicated the work to Henry VIII. One effect was that soon after its publication he was invited to England where he spent some years as tutor to the Princess Mary. From this brief biography, it seems most likely that the plays he describes were those performed in the Low Countries, probably in Louvain where he had been appointed professor in 1519.<sup>13</sup> So while Vives' edition itself was well-known and well-received in England after 1522, his comments on the drama are unlikely to have been directed specifically at English versions of Passion plays.

---

<sup>10</sup> Marginal note: 'The Louanists want this'.

<sup>11</sup> St Augustine, *Of the Citie of God: with the learned comments of Io. Lod. Vives*, Englished by J.H. (George Eld. 1610) 337. Sad to say, the 'fitter place' has not yet come to light.

<sup>12</sup> See Carlos G Norena, *A Vives Bibliography*, Studies in the Renaissance Vol 5 (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) Introduction.

<sup>13</sup> This may have been the assumption of the 1610 English translator, John Healey, who includes next to the account the marginal gloss, 'The Louanists want this'; though this may equally refer to Healey's knowledge of the reputation of the Roman Catholic university in seventeenth century England.

Nonetheless, what is described seems as though it might throw a relevant light on related dramatic events and performance possibilities in England.

Vives' critical attitude to the popular biblical drama of the late middle ages was not unusual among the intellectuals of the early sixteenth century, although it does seem to draw him rather closer to the reforming thought of the early protestants than to the Roman Catholic humanists such as More and Erasmus.<sup>14</sup> Most of these humanist scholars did not object to drama as such, especially classical or Latin plays, Erasmus and others seeing them as a useful educational tool, promoting moral and intellectual understanding, a confident public presence, and language learning. Vives' own lively Latin dialogues for schoolboys might suggest that he shared this view, but he was in fact rather more explicitly critical of drama than most humanists. In various writings he focused both on the immoral content of classical plays and their capacity to inflame the imagination and over-ride moral judgement.<sup>15</sup>

Vives' objections to contemporary vernacular drama seem based in a similar distrust of misdirected imaginative engagement. He rejected the primarily emotive quality of late medieval devotional practice, which underlay what he saw as the dangers of this kind of popular public enactment of the events of Christ's life. Vives seems concerned that those observing the events of the Passion are being encouraged to inappropriate and uncomprehendingly emotive reactions. This sort of suspicion of the affective power of devotional theatre and its ability to provoke misplaced fervour is of course of long standing. The fifteenth century *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, spells out very similar dangers, complaining that:

þe wepyng þat falliþ to men and wymmen by þe si3te of siche miraclis pleyinge,  
as þei ben not principaly for þeire oune synnes, ne of þeire gode feiþ  
wiþinneforþe, but more of þeire si3t wiþouteforþ, is not alowable byfore God

---

<sup>14</sup> For critical Protestant reaction to medieval biblical drama see Gillet, n 5.

<sup>15</sup> For a useful comparison of Vives' views on drama with those of More and Erasmus, see Howard B Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain, 1485-1558* (Lincoln, [Neb.] ; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 95-108. For Vives' own lively engagement in quasi-dramatic forms see, for example, his book of school dialogues, *Tudor School-Boy Life: The Dialogues of Juan Luis Vives*, edited and translated by Foster Watson (London: Dent, 1908).

but more reprovabale ... havynge more compassion of peyn þanne of synne, þei falsly wepyn for lakkyng of bodily prosperite more þan for lakkyng of gostly.<sup>16</sup>

The Reformation revived these arguments. Around the time Vives wrote his commentary, Luther was similarly urging in 1518 that the point of meditation was to turn the meditator's mind not to emotional engagement in the events of Christ's life, but to his own spiritual condition:

Homini non est necessarium, ut Christum in ipsius passionem deploret, sed magis seipsum in Christo.<sup>17</sup>

It is not required for a man to weep for Christ in his passion, but rather for himself in Christ.

Vives shares the suspicion of affective devotion, presenting his spectators as doubly uncomprehending. They do not weep at all, even for Christ, but he clearly sees them as responding emotionally to the immediacy of the events represented, and not reflecting on the spiritual significance of those events to themselves.

Although Vives' account is unsympathetic, it does appear to give us a particularly sharp and persuasively authentic sense of spectator reaction. One important feature is that the response seems very *vocal*. This is not a reverently quiet audience, but one which laughs, hisses and applauds the shifts of the action, participating noisily in its effects. It sounds as though the whole experience of the drama is as much defined by the shared audience involvement as it is by the actors. We might understand the difference made to the meaning of the performance if we compare today's experience of being present at a live football match with that of watching it on television. We may see the same actions in both settings, but the shared participation with an energetically noisy and engaged crowd of spectators can transform both our reception and our understanding of what we see. Interestingly, oblique but somewhat comparable testimony to the exuberance of early sixteenth century audiences can be

---

<sup>16</sup> *The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* in Greg Walker, *Medieval Drama: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 199-200.

<sup>17</sup> Luther, *Duo sermones de passione Christi*, 1518. Cited Gillet (n 5) 483 n 70

found from Thomas More, who was in general far more positive about drama as a medium than Vives. More imagines his antagonist Luther ‘performing’ a disputation:

in his own theater, where the seats have been packed with scoundrels who ... at each blasphemy will applaud and repeat, ‘Bravo!’ But at each word of the one who would come to dispute with Luther, with shouting, grimacing, stomping, pounding, they will interrupt him, hoot at him, hiss him off the stage.<sup>18</sup>

While this is only an imaginary performance, of a debate not a play, and before a hostile crowd, More suggests the same sort of vocal engagement and possibly a somewhat similar suspicion of the volatility of popular response. Like Vives, he implies that participation in the event through noisily vocal reaction is a normal feature of early spectatorship.

One immediate surprise in Vives’ account lies in those episodes which he identifies as provoking laughter: Judas betraying Christ, the apostles running away from the soldiers, the servant girl questioning Peter. We are used to the idea that the English biblical plays rely extensively on creating humorous interactions with their audiences. If we consider our surviving texts, the movement between the tonally serious and the tonally funny is fluid and frequent. It is an easy movement characteristic of ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ performance.<sup>19</sup> This frequently occurs where later audiences might find it surprising, potentially uncomfortable if not openly irreverent. It was one of the features of medieval theatre regularly objected to by critics, from the Lollards to the humanists and Protestants. Nor is it always the case that comic material is ‘inserted’ into biblical episodes. Rather, certain biblical characters and events are themselves explored with laughter, even when their import is serious. Obvious examples would be the Towneley *Killing of Abel*, where the funny but startling scurrility with which Cain treats the sacred (inviting God to wipe his arse with a wisp of corn) is an integral part of the action of the sacrifice and not a separate plot strand; or the N-Town play of *Joseph’s Trouble*, where Joseph’s outspoken worries about his wife’s chastity, his

---

<sup>18</sup> Thomas More, *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, edited by John M. Headley, and translated by Scholastica Mandeville, Vol. 5, [*Responsio Ad Lutherum*]. Pt. 1 (New Haven [Conn.]; London: Yale University Press, 1969) 43-45.

<sup>19</sup> See eg Petr Bogatyrev, ‘Semiotics in the Folk Theater’ in *Semiotics of Art* edited Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976)



own impotence, and the social and physical unlikeliness of the virgin conception invite laughter around the sacred event.

But in these episodes we can read the laughter from script, in the speeches provided for the characters. What Vives describes suggests that in the original performances of biblical drama laughter may well have been extended to many other episodes where it may not be visible to us in the play texts. We cannot, of course, gauge this with accuracy as we do not know for sure which plays he is describing and have no texts to explore. But given the apparent relative similarity of such traditional drama in different countries at the time, it sounds as though laughter may have been licensed and even encouraged more fully around the events of the Passion than we have already realised. Such a perception might make sense of some other snippets of record about audience response which equally express anxiety about laughter at serious events. Soon after Vives' comments, early sixteenth century Protestant criticism of late medieval drama raises similar concerns. Joachim Greff, a playwright from Dessau who published an Easter play in 1542, remembered the difficulty of staging the Passion in the late middle ages:

Ursach / das die Jüden / mit der Spötterey so sie die person Christi angelegt /  
das volck mehr zum lachen gereitzt dann zu andacht bewegt.<sup>20</sup>

Because the Jews, by the jeers they made against the person of Christ, aroused the people to laughter more than they moved them to devotion.

Closer to home, and well before the anxieties of the Reformation, the episode of the York Masons and their Fergus pageant in the Corpus Christi cycle suggests that this was neither an entirely new nor a late decadent audience reaction. In 1431-2 the Masons negotiated to be relieved of their pageant of the Funeral of the Virgin, which included the miraculous episode of the blasphemous attack by the Jews on the Virgin's bier. They offered a number of reasons for this, but one of the strongest seems to have been the audience response. The pageant, they claimed, *magis risum & clamorem causabat quam deuocionem* ('used to produce more noise and laughter than

---

<sup>20</sup> *Werke* (Kritische Gesamtausgabe) 2: 136, Cited Gillet, German Dramatist, 489 n82

devotion'). In fact, it appears that *lites contenciones & pugne inde proueniebant* ('quarrels, disagreements and fights used to arise among the people from this').<sup>21</sup> The implication here seems to be that the laughter the play provoked was unwelcome and unintentional; but equally, it sounds as though the audience response was both expected and long-standing.

Both of these comments identify audience laughter specifically with representations of the Jews. On the basis of English playtexts, we may not find this wholly surprising, since where the Jews are grouped *en masse* as tormentors or opponents they are generally to some degree caricatured. But Vives' account suggests that laughter spread considerably wider than this, and in fact that only Christ was exempt. It may be that we need to widen our assumptions about the tonal experience of a much wider range of actions, characters and episodes in these plays. The interplay between humour and reverence may be more intricate and more robust than we realise.

An audience's laughter, especially at caricatured enemies, may be a reaction of superiority, scorn, group-identity or defensiveness. But another particularly interesting aspect of Vives' account is that it is not only laughter that he identifies as a vocal audience response. He also tells us of hissing (at Peter's denial) and applause (at his cutting off Malchus' ear). These sound not so much like the distancing of scornful laughter, but a direct emotional engagement in the surface heroics of the action. Vives' sharp analysis of the movement of spectator sympathy is particularly telling: 'Then comes *Peter*, and cuttes off *Malchus* eare, and then all rings with applause, as if *Christs* betraying were now reuenged.' This seems a genuine interpretation not of the play, but of the act of performance itself and the meaning it generates. We find the same insight in the reported comedy of the encounter between Peter and the maidservant: 'And by and by this great fighter comes and for feare of a girle, denies his Maister, all the people laughing at her question, and hissing at his deniall.' This, too, seems to capture the moment of performance, and the spectators' intense experience of joyfully conflicting sympathies and responses. It gives us a powerful sense of the experience of watching the play.

---

<sup>21</sup> REED *York*, 1: 48; 2: 732.

Vives' account reveals that, even more than we already realise, late medieval audiences seem to have a participatory role. The description might remind us of the mode of twentieth century pantomime – not pantomime's specific theatrical traditions, but its audible engagement of its audience in the rapid transitions between stylised comic, serious, heroic, trivial, tragic and triumphant moments.<sup>22</sup> The audience have an active role, to laugh, hiss, applaud, sigh, weep. In this, Vives sometimes seems to link them directly with the actors, as though the two are inseparable in the act of performance. The elegance of Haines early English translation sometimes obscures this link. So when Vives describes how *discipuli fugiunt militibus persequentibus* ('the disciples run away with the soldiers after them') he tells us that *nec sine cachinnis & actorum & spectatorum* ('both actors and spectators roar with laughter'). Similarly, in his resonant conclusion he places blame *non tam eorum qui uel spectant, uel agunt, quam sacerdotum, qui eiusmodi fieri curant* ('not so much on those who watch or act, but on the priests who encourage this sort of thing to be done'). Those who watch and those who act are colleagues and collaborators in the creation of the performance. This is the broad underlying significance of the study of theatrical spectatorship. Vives may have intended purely negative criticism of this kind of drama; but his account gives us vital and positive evidence for developing our understanding of the power and complexity of late medieval spectatorship.

---

<sup>22</sup> Millie Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance* (Chicago University Press, 2009)